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UNCLAS ABU DHABI 00993

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 ABU DHABI 000993

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE PASS USTR FOR DOUG BELL, JENNIFER PRESCOTT  
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E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [ECON](#) [EPET](#) [ETRD](#) [KSCA](#) [SENV](#) [TC](#)  
SUBJECT: ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY TO REMAIN A LONG-TERM  
UAE PRIORITY

REF: A. A)STATE 25544  
[1](#)B. B)04 ABU DHABI 1114  
[1](#)C. C)04 DUBAI 1410  
[1](#)D. D)03 ABU DHABI 3593  
[1](#)E. E)04 ABU DHABI 3875

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Former UAE President Sheikh Zayed, who died in November 2004, was widely respected in the UAE as an avid environmentalist who worked to "green" the UAE by promoting forestry and agriculture. Rapid expansion of agriculture, however, has negatively impacted the UAE's ground water reserves. Led by some of Sheikh Zayed's sons, the UAE has begun a review of the scientific sustainability of Zayed's environmental projects. This continued high-level attention ensures that preserving the environment will remain a core domestic policy of the UAE, while ensuring increased scientific studies of the sustainability of such policies.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Summary (continued): Despite the high-level attention to environmental preservation, the UAE faces a number of serious environmental challenges (Ref B). High levels of per capita energy consumption, overfishing of marine stocks, climate change, wildlife preservation, and most importantly, limited ground water reserves, all remain key environmental concerns for the UAE. The UAE needs to remain engaged on effective environmental enforcement equally applied throughout each emirate to ensure the long-term economic and environmental sustainability of current industrial and commercial policies. End Summary.

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UAE Government Structure  
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¶3. (U) The UAE is a federation of seven emirates (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al-Qaiwain, Fujairah, and Ras Al-Khaimah) founded in December 1971. The federal structure of the UAE, like that of the U.S., reserves certain powers for the federal government, while ceding others to the individual emirates. Under the constitution, the federal government assumed the responsibility and authority for certain areas that affect the federation as a whole, such as foreign affairs, while the individual emirates retain authority in areas not specifically delegated to the federation. In all cases, however, federal laws and decrees trump8 emirate-level laws. Individual emirates maintain ownership of natural resources within their borders. Abu Dhabi controls 90% of the proven oil and gas reserves in the UAE and is the wealthiest emirate.

¶4. (U) The Federal Environmental Agency (FEA), established in 1993, is the federal agency charged with drafting UAE environmental laws and regulations. It is also the point of contact for international conventions such as CITES and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification. The UAE passed and implemented a comprehensive federal environmental law in 1999 (Federal Law 24/1999) and a companion federal marine resources law (Federal Law 23/1999). (Note: Arabic text of the law is available at [www.erwda.gov.ae](http://www.erwda.gov.ae) and Embassy has English translations available in hard copy. End note.) Federal Law 24/1999 stipulates that all projects implemented in the UAE require environmental impact assessments to ensure that the project does not adversely affect the environment. The law also stipulates penalties, including fines and imprisonment, for polluting the environment. Federal Law 11/2002 is designed to regulate trade in wildlife.

¶5. (U) Although FEA is responsible for environmental laws and regulations, other federal ministries are also involved in specific environmental projects. The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries promulgates laws relating to agriculture, pesticides, and marine resources. The Ministry for Presidential Affairs oversees the forestry and agriculture programs and funds groundwater research.

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Enforcement  
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¶6. (U) In keeping with the federal nature of the UAE, the individual emirates are responsible for enforcing environmental laws, although the FEA has the authority to monitor implementation. The municipal authorities are responsible for enforcement in the emirates of Dubai, Ajman, Umm Al-Qaiwain, and Fujairah. Ras Al-Khaimah delegates environmental enforcement authority to the Environment Protection and Industrial Development Commission (EPIDC), and Sharjah has an Environment and Protected Areas Authority (EPAA). The Emirate of Abu Dhabi established the Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency (ERWDA) in 1996, which is the largest and most proactive of the environmental enforcement groups in the UAE. Abu Dhabi Emirate,s Executive Council designated ERWDA as the "Competent Authority" for environment and wildlife issues in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi in November 2000, and it serves as Abu Dhabi,s official agency responsible for implementing environmental laws. ERWDA also manages the five-year Environmental Strategy and Action Plans for the Emirate of Abu Dhabi (available at Post in hard copy), which is Abu Dhabi,s plan for managing the environment. ERWDA is also a scientific and educational institution that serves, for example, as the UAE,s scientific authority for the CITES convention. Its website is available at [www.erwda.gov.ae](http://www.erwda.gov.ae).

¶7. (SBU) The Emirate of Abu Dhabi, in particular, has a historical and political commitment to environmental protection. UAE founding father and longtime President

Sheikh Zayed Al-Nahyan, who died in November 2004, was an avid environmentalist. He spearheaded Abu Dhabi's intensive efforts to "green" the UAE by building forests, supporting agriculture, and preserving wildlife. Abu Dhabi's current leadership continue to play a proactive role in environmental stewardship led by Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ), Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Hamdan bin Zayed (HbZ), and Minister for Presidential Affairs Mansour bin Zayed (Note: HbZ currently serves as Deputy Chairman of ERWDA. End note.). In December, Abu Dhabi also proposed a special task force to protect the environment under the auspices of the General Directorate of Abu Dhabi Police.

¶18. (SBU) Other Emirates have had varying commitments to the environment. For example, federal law requires all the emirates to carry out Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) before beginning new construction projects. Third-party companies complete the assessments, and the emirate-level enforcement authorities certify the results. Effectiveness of these assessments vary however; Dubai, for example, is said to be "business friendly" in its EIA review. Dubai's major construction initiatives, especially the construction of the various offshore projects, are widely viewed as, at least in the near-term, altering the marine environment in the Arabian Gulf.

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Nongovernmental Environmental Players  
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¶19. (U) The Dubai-based NGO Emirates Environmental Group (EEG) is the only environmental NGO in the UAE. Formed in 1991 with the aim of protecting the environment through education, action programs, and community involvement, Chairperson Habiba Al Marashi has built the organization into one of the most proactive NGOs in the UAE. EEG coordinates with individuals, private businesses, schools, and government in the UAE through its large outreach network, including corporate sponsorship program, clubs at schools and universities, and events like litter clean-up days. The EEG's newly formed Corporate Social Responsibility Network (ref C) promotes a greater focus on sustainable development through seminars and other awareness-raising events. See their website at [www.eeg-uae.org](http://www.eeg-uae.org) for more information.

¶10. (U) Academic institutions are involved in some environmental research, and UAE University offers a Master's degree in Environmental Science. ERWDA is encouraging the universities to take a more substantial role in environmental research, and is exploring a Memorandum of Understanding with UAE University. UAE University is also partnering with ERWDA in the Abu Dhabi Global Environmental Data Initiative, a project announced at the Johannesburg conference and conducted under the auspices of UNEP.

¶11. (U) Private sector involvement in the environment is generally weak, although some businesses and corporations in the UAE include an environmental department, most prominently in the petroleum sector. Although Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) is most involved in geology (petroleum and ground water), some of the foreign oil companies here complete environmental projects unrelated to their businesses.

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Major Environmental Issues  
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¶12. (SBU) The UAE is largely a desert country, and as such, its ground water reserves are one of the most important natural resources, and also one of its most vulnerable to exploitation. Management of ground water reserves is not allocated to any one ministry, most likely because of the social and economic importance of water. The Ministry for Presidential Affairs, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, the National Drilling Company, FEA, and the local emirates all

involve themselves in the use and distribution of water. The United States Geological Survey has been operating in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi since 1991, maintaining wells and collecting and analyzing data on fresh water ground reserves.

¶13. (SBU) Major stresses on water reserves include the agriculture sector (Ref D), the forestries program, and excessive water usage. Longtime agriculture incentives and subsidies are under review, since there are concerns that they are not economically sustainable and also harmful to maintaining ground water reserves. The UAEG is slowly phasing out the subsidies that have long maintained the sector, to discourage uneconomic farming. ERWDA and Mubadala (an Abu Dhabi government investment and development company) are also reviewing the forestry program for its scientific sustainability; most of the forests in Abu Dhabi, however, use brackish ground water supplies instead of fresh water. The third stress is the overconsumption of water by the population. The average per capita consumption of water (includes home use, agricultural, and industrial use) in the UAE is approximately 133 gallons per day (the third-largest in the world, after the US and Canada), and consumers in Abu Dhabi are not charged for their water consumption. Nearly all of the water produced in the UAE is desalinated seawater. There is no strategic reserve of ground water or desalinated water in the UAE, a potential security concern. The desalinated water in the pipelines is only enough to supply about 3 days of water.

¶14. (SBU) The UAE is a major oil exporting country, with 10% of the world's known petroleum reserves, most of which lie in Abu Dhabi. Abu Dhabi National Oil Company has established Health, Safety, and Environment policies and objectives including the elimination of hydrocarbon flaring and other policies designed to minimize the impact of the oil industry on the environment. Based on a 1998 GCC resolution, the UAE phased out leaded gasoline and replaced it with unleaded gasoline as of January 1, 2003.

¶15. (SBU) Per capita energy consumption in the UAE is among the highest in the world. The World Wildlife Federation's 2004 Living Planet Report listed the UAE as the country with the worst ecological impact per capita (Ref C), primarily for the significant area of land required to absorb the CO2 waste from fossil fuels. Residents use large amounts of electricity and water to regulate temperature (through air conditioning in the extreme heat of summer. The fast pace of industrial development and heavily subsidized electricity and water also contribute to the high per capita energy consumption.

¶16. (U) Overfishing of marine stocks in the Arabian Gulf is another key environmental priority. Climate change in the Gulf also has an impact on the marine stocks. ERWDA is currently conducting scientific reviews of fish stocks in the UAE, and every year fewer fishing permits are being issued. Like many other environmental issues in the UAE, however, overfishing has a socio-economic impact since many of the fishermen are among the poorest Emirati nationals. Preserving the industry also has cultural implications for the rapidly changing population.

¶17. (U) The UAE is aggressively involved in preserving wildlife, particularly through natural reserves and breeding programs for endangered species. Particularly important is their houbara bustard breeding program. Houbara bustards, a favored game bird in falconry (a traditional Bedouin sport favored today by many wealthy Emiratis) have been threatened by overhunting, and the UAE is actively involved in encouraging healthy breeding programs throughout the Middle East and Central Asia to maintain the bustard population and preserve the sport of falconry. The UAE has also invested significant resources in maintaining healthy populations of falcons, gazelle, and oryx.

¶18. (U) Industrial pollution is not a major concern in the Emirates, although aggressive construction possesses a hazard

to the natural resources. Although EIAs are required for new construction, the size and speed of development in the UAE, especially in Dubai, remains a concern. In a recent conference, the EEG noted in particular the growth of the tourism industry in the Emirate of Dubai, and the need to remain aware of the environmental impact of such rapid growth.

¶19. (U) Four huge offshore projects in Dubai have started causing some changes in the environment, at least in the short term, and some environmentally-concerned residents have begun raising concerns. The Palm Island Jumeirah, a billion-dollar-plus artificial island in the shape of a palm tree has reduced visibility, affected the underwater fauna, and even changed the water flows in the vicinity. The environmental impact studies for this project indicate that these negative effects will be short-term, and that eventually the visibility will increase and the fauna will become more diversified than before. The change in water flows has led to more beach erosion, but the developers are taking steps to prevent this, including building protective barriers. Two other Palm Islands, and 593,000 square feet of artificial islands called The World, are also planned or under construction.

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Comment  
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¶20. (SBU) The UAE has a fairly robust record on environmental protection, but there are significant areas for improvement. Eliminating government subsidies that promote unsustainable water and electricity consumption would remove some of the most harmful practices in the UAE. Increasing enforcement equally across the emirates would also offer greater checks on the major construction projects in the key areas of water resource management, marine fisheries, and energy consumption. Finally, greater international cooperation, particularly with other Gulf countries, could encourage greater research and progress on protecting Arabian Gulf fisheries, water resource development, and cross-border wildlife preservation.

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